



Character Themes: Twisted by Darkness

By Doug Hyatt

Illustration by Jesper Ejsing

The sins of an adventurer's past can haunt her to her grave, but in the grim world of Ravenloft, guilt or remorse might not be the only consequence of committing an evil act.

Each moral misstep an individual takes risks drawing the attention of the dark powers. The motives and goals of these entities are unknowable, but a few facts about them are apparent.

These mysterious entities sometimes reward a character who transgresses, but the gift comes at a great price: a life cursed ever after with unrelenting pain and suffering.

Some who are touched by the dark powers take the form of the grotesque individuals known as misshapen, whose death-dealing extremities have been monstrously twisted. Others become haunted blades, doomed to feel their victims' dying terror for the remainder of their days.

TM & © 2012 Wizards of the Coast LLC. All rights reserved.

CHARACTER THEMES

Your character's theme is a career, calling, or identity that describes who he or she is in the world. Just as race and class create basic definitions about who your character is, theme adds a third character component to help refine your story and identity.

For information on using themes as part of character creation and rules for how to gain and use theme powers and features, see "Heroes of Nature and Lore" (*Dragon* 399), the first article in this series.

Each of the character themes in this article should apply only to a character who has committed a morally questionable or outright evil act. The dark powers have taken notice of the character's misdeeds and granted her the benefits of one of these themes. Accompanying these advantages, however, is a terrible affliction, which will have a substantial impact on how the character develops over the course of a campaign.

If you're interested in using one of these themes, you should work together with the DM and the rest of the party to make sure that everyone is comfortable with you roleplaying one of these character types. Although the "gift" from the dark powers can be treated as a mere annoyance if you so choose (an oddly shaped limb in the case of a misshapen, or an indefinable air of menace for a haunted blade), consider embracing the spirit of the RAVENLOFT setting and making your character's tortured nature an important part of the roleplaying experience.

Even at these depths of despair and depravity, all is not lost: An afflicted individual might yet find a way to atone for past misdeeds and thereby lift the curse of the dark powers. For others, though, the descent into darkness and evil can have but one end.

This article describes two new character themes, the misshapen and the haunted blade. They are designed for use in a campaign that uses or draws from the RAVENLOFT® setting, but can be part of any campaign that takes place wholly or partly in the Shadowfell.

MISSHAPEN

When a person commits an act of brutal violence without the use of a weapon other than one's bare hands, the dark powers might consign the perpetrator to live afterward as one of the misshapen. The offender could be a thief who strangles his partner so he can keep treasure for himself, or a bounty hunter who holds his prey underwater until it drowns, or a jealous sibling who pushes his brother off a cliff, or a corrupt magistrate who tosses exculpatory evidence into the flames. Anyone who acts in such a way risks being noticed and cursed by the dark powers. When the powers decide to take notice, the individual is surrounded suddenly by the mists and experiences a gruesome transformation. The limb that carried out the foul deed becomes monstrously twisted and malformed. These unfortunates make up the ranks of the misshapen, and each must endure a continuing existence of solitude and suffering.

Most misshapen keep to themselves and hide their deformed limbs beneath their cloaks. (The afflicted appendage is almost always an arm or some other extremity used for gripping and manipulation, even if the limb that committed the evil deed was not actually of that sort.) Although a misshapen's mutated limb might be viewed by many (including that individual) as a horrible detriment, it does provide some

benefit to the character, who gains extraordinary abilities from the altered appendage.

Despite the potential usefulness of these transformations they suffer, misshapen tend to avoid the villages and settlements of Ravenloft. When they travel through civilized areas, misshapen often meet suspicion and fear, because the common folk lack compassion or tolerance for things they cannot understand. Many a tale has been told of villagers chasing a monster from their midst, and in some of those cases the creature might not have been a true monster at all. As such, most misshapen would rather not risk capture or death at the hands of an angry mob. Occasionally, however, such a character does encounter kindness from strangers, and some societies might even welcome a misshapen into their midst.

Most often, the curse of the dark powers alters one of the misshapen's limbs to resemble that of an animal or monster, such as an ogre's fist or a tiger's paw. Over time, the curse might worsen or spread. The behavior of the affected limb could become unpredictable. It might occasionally act of its own accord, without its owner's consent, suddenly snaking out to grab a victim by the throat, or striking a creature that has angered or irritated the misshapen. In such cases, the offending limb responds to the emotional state of the misshapen and acts on his or her subconscious impulses. A misshapen beset with this kind of affliction must take special care to control or suppress angry reactions, lest the altered appendage suddenly come to life.

Some misshapen seek only to rid themselves of this curse, and will go to any lengths to obtain knowledge that might aid them in eliminating their condition. Other misshapen view their affliction as a blessing from the dark powers and see themselves as an evolutionary improvement over their unaltered companions.

Creating a Misshapen

Misshapen come from all walks of life, for no one is immune to the curse of the dark powers. Those with a wild, primitive nature, such as barbarians and fighters, seem particularly susceptible to the affliction. The curse also frequently strikes shifters, lycanthropes, and wilden, although members of any other race can be transformed if they commit an act of savage violence.

Starting Feature

After an individual is touched by the dark powers, one of its arms becomes twisted and malformed. With that affliction, however, comes a new source of strength. Using your altered appendage, you can snatch an enemy from the battlefield and hold it in your grasp.

Benefit: You gain the *grasping limb* power.

Grasping Limb

Misshapen Attack

You lash out with your malformed arm to grab a foe.

Encounter ♦ Shadow

Standard Action **Melee 2**

Requirement: You must have a hand free.

Target: One creature

Attack: Highest ability modifier + 2 vs. Reflex

Level 11: Highest ability modifier + 4 vs. Reflex

Level 21: Highest ability modifier + 6 vs. Reflex

Hit: 2d8 + your highest ability modifier damage, and you pull the target 1 square and grab it until the end of your next turn.

Level 21: 3d8 + highest ability modifier damage.

Sustain Standard: The grab persists until the end of your next turn, and the grabbed target takes 2d8 + your highest ability modifier damage.

Level 21: 3d8 + highest ability modifier damage.

Special: When making an opportunity attack, you can use this power in place of a melee basic attack.

Additional Features

Level 5 Feature

The dark powers of Ravenloft imbue the misshapen with the strength and agility of monsters or beasts. You can draw upon this power to scale difficult cliffs or leap across yawning chasms.

Benefit: You gain a +2 power bonus to Athletics checks and Acrobatics checks.

Level 10 Feature

As your curse progresses, you gain greater strength in your affected limb, and weapons wielded in that arm can strike opponents with enhanced force.

Benefit: When you push, pull, or slide an enemy with a melee attack, you can increase the distance of the forced movement by 1.

Optional Powers

Some misshapen embrace their deformity and become able to alter their bodies to fulfill a particular need. Through focused training, you can gain advantages with your physical mutations, such as increased strength in your limb, a protective layer of chitin, or enhanced powers of perception.

Level 2 Utility Power

The curse of a misshapen can sometimes grant superior vision, including the ability to see in total darkness. You can temporarily imbue your sight with the capacity to pierce the deepest shadows.

Shadow Sight

Misshapen Utility 2

Your eyes flare brightly, enabling you to see into even the deepest shadows for a time.

Encounter ♦ Shadow

Minor Action

Personal

Effect: Until the end of your next turn, you gain darkvision and ignore any concealment.

Level 6 Utility Power

When threatened, some misshapen can grow a shimmering black shell that roils with dark magic. You can surround yourself with an unnerving shell that repels nearby enemies.

Dread Carapace

Misshapen Utility 6

A thick shell surrounds your form, frightening your enemies away.

Daily ♦ Fear, Shadow

Minor Action

Personal

Effect: Until the end of the encounter, you gain a +2 power bonus to AC and Fortitude. In addition, when any enemy ends its turn adjacent to you, it must use a free action to move up to its speed away from you.

Level 10 Utility Power

By honing your skill with your malformed limb, you can take advantage of the feature that sets you apart.

Altered Extremity

Misshapen Utility 10

Capitalizing on your malformed limb, you can extend your cursed appendage to an unnatural degree.

Encounter ♦ Shadow

Minor Action

Personal

Effect: Until the end of your next turn, your reach increases by 1, and you gain a +2 power bonus to melee damage rolls.

HAUNTED BLADE

When a mortal commits a cold, calculated act of violence with a sword, an axe, or some other weapon, he risks being cursed by the dark powers to a life of fear and suffering. Perhaps the warrior put an entire village to the sword in an effort to capture and kill one escaped criminal. Perhaps he desecrated a holy temple, shattering sacred relics with a great warhammer. Or perhaps he betrayed and executed an innocent friend with a headsman's axe. From such unspeakable deeds are born the haunted blades, warriors doomed to carry the terror of their victims with them for the rest of their days.

Even though some haunted blades commit their crimes in the name of a noble cause, they, like all of their number, have been singled out by the dark powers for a unique gift. The violent deed leaves the haunted blade forever changed. Henceforth, when such a warrior draws his weapon, his countenance takes on the appearance of a creature infused with dark power, and he becomes terrifying to behold. The sins from his past resonate with a haunted blade when he ventures into battle, and the fear and horror his innocent victims once felt emanates from him in waves of sheer terror. For a brief moment, the haunted blade is able to share with his enemies the deep fear he endures every day.

Whether a haunted blade has been chosen by the dark powers is open for debate. Some scholars posit that spirits of ancient magic weapons roam the domains of dread, and these spirits are drawn to acts of darkness like moths to a flame. Under this theory, the dark spirit gains access to the haunted blade's mind, lurking in the deep recesses of his brain. Although the spirit is unable to take control of its mortal host, when the haunted blade draws his weapon, the ancient spirit surges into it. The drawn weapon often becomes encased in shadow, and ebon tendrils snake forth from its surface, hungering for

blood. Regardless of whether a haunted blade has been touched by the dark powers or invaded by a shadowy spirit of an ancient weapon (or perhaps both), the force inside the warrior will attempt to steer him down the path to evil.

Haunted blades often depend on their companions for support in their dark and treacherous journey. Many such characters are truly repentant, and seek out allies of good moral codes to help them make up for their past mistakes. Sometimes the darkness inside a haunted blade bubbles to the surface, however, and one might commit an act that its allies find troublesome. Such an act might be murdering a creature that has surrendered in battle, torturing a prisoner for information, erupting in sudden violence while in the peaceful confines of a city, or turning on a trusted ally.

A haunted blade often hears the whispers of the dark force inside him, urging him toward acts of betrayal, but this path is by no means an inevitable one. If you're interested in using this theme, talk to your DM and the other players to ensure that a character who might suddenly turn on his allies (which is entirely the player's decision; this theme does not mandate such an occurrence) is something the group finds fun to roleplay and an acceptable addition to the party.

Haunted blades carry within themselves the seeds of what it means to be a dark lord. At some point each one must choose which direction his or her life will take. Will a haunted blade continue the descent into darkness, winning more favor from the dark powers until finally becoming a dark lord? Or will he instead choose the path of virtue, trusting in his companions to show him the way back to the light? Until that day of redemption comes, when a haunted blade strides into battle with weapon drawn, his enemies will cower before him. They know instinctively that this darkness is not to be trifled with; it is a force of pure dread in a world already filled with horror.

Creating a Haunted Blade

Usually those who become haunted blades already have a strong, forceful personality. Warlords, paladins, and ardents are especially common among characters who have this theme; bards and warlocks who favor melee weapons also often become haunted blades. Regardless of race or class, haunted blades carry a darkness inside them and a capacity for evil that they must constantly strive to keep in check.

Starting Feature

Wherever haunted blades travel, they carry the fear felt by their previous victims. When you channel the darkness within you through your weapon, your enemies quail in abject terror. If a foe dares to drop its guard in your presence, you freeze it in its tracks with a well-timed strike.

Benefit: You gain the *blade of nightmares* power.

Blade of Nightmares

Haunted Blade Utility

As your weapon becomes wreathed in dark energy, you strike a distracted opponent, which freezes in terror.

Encounter ♦ Fear, Shadow

No Action

Special

Trigger: You hit an enemy with an opportunity attack.

Effect: The enemy is immobilized until the end of its next turn.

Additional Features

Level 5 Feature

Haunted blades are masters of coercion, able to force the weak-willed to do their bidding with only a subtle gesture or a few quietly spoken words. You have mastered the art of instilling fear in others with your words and your body language.

Benefit: When you make an Intimidate check, you can roll twice and use either result.

Level 10 Feature

The haunted blade's imperious presence on the battlefield gives other combatants pause. While your opponents hesitate, you leap quickly to the attack.

Benefit: You can substitute your Charisma modifier for your Dexterity modifier when making initiative checks.

Optional Powers

A haunted blade radiates power and authority. He expect others to be subservient before his fearsome presence. Your powers focus on enhancing your stature and your aura of menace on the battlefield, from imbuing each of your strikes with unbridled horror to scything your whispering blade through the bodies and minds of nearby foes.

Level 3 Attack Power

Haunted blades can channel their frightful presence into each of their weapon strikes. When you strike at enemies that surround you, you fill their minds with despair.

Blade of Dark Whispers Haunted Blade Attack 3

Your foes tremble before the menacing whispers of your fearsome blade.

Encounter ♦ Fear, Shadow, Weapon
Standard Action Close burst 1

Target: Each enemy in the burst

Attack: Highest ability modifier vs. AC

Hit: 1[W] + highest ability modifier damage, and the target takes a -2 penalty to Will until the end of your next turn.

Level 6 Utility Power

Some haunted blades learn to adopt a stance that strikes terror into their enemies, causing them to recoil before each of their attacks. When you channel

terror through your weapon, your strikes leave your opponents shaken and reluctant to remain near you.

Blade of Black Wind Haunted Blade Utility 6

Dark winds howl around your weapon, and each time you strike an enemy, that foe recoils in terror.

Daily ♦ Martial, Shadow, Stance
Minor Action Personal

Effect: You assume the blade of black wind stance. Until the stance ends, any creature you hit with a melee weapon attack grants combat advantage until the end of your next turn. In addition, when you hit an enemy with a melee weapon attack, you can push that enemy 1 square.

Level 10 Utility Power

Some haunted blades learn how to cultivate their connection to the Shadowfell. You can cause your form to shimmer in and out of the material world as you temporarily become a creature of shadow.

Blade of Flickering Shadows Haunted Blade Utility 10

Encased in writhing shadows, your form begins to flicker, and your weapon ripples with ebon energy.


Daily ♦ Shadow, Stance
Minor Action Personal

Effect: You assume the blade of flickering shadows stance. Until the stance ends, you are phasing, have resist 10 necrotic, and can change any untyped damage you deal with weapon attacks to necrotic damage.

About the Author

Doug Hyatt is the author of "Unfriendly Skies" in *Dungeon* 205 and "Character Themes: Fringes of Drow Society" in *Dragon* 413. He is a computational biologist living in Tennessee. You can follow him on Twitter as @doug_hyatt.

FREE ONLINE PLAY!



DUNGEONS & DRAGONS ONLINE

Customize & Play a Unique Hero from 100s of Race & Class Combos

www.ddo.com